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Legitimacy in Public Recreation: Examining Rhetorical Shifts in Institutional Creation and Maintenance

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**Legitimacy in Public Recreation:
Examining Rhetorical Shifts in Institutional Creation and Maintenance**

Abstract

This paper uncovers the rhetorical strategies used by the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) to affect institutional discourse and field logics during the first 25 years of its existence (1965-1990). Analyzing editorials featured in the organization's flagship publication, *Parks & Recreation*, we describe how the NRPA sought to establish itself as the legitimate steward of public recreation, sport, and leisure in the U.S. by utilizing five rhetorical approaches: normalization, rationalization, moralization, authorization, and anti-authorization. Furthermore, we identify discrete patterns and combinations of strategies that have thus far not been described in the literature. Our research adds to prior sport-related institutional work scholarship, which has examined the importance of legitimacy in attempting to establish alternative modes of organizing and functioning in a field dominated by powerful incumbents, by offering an alternative look at the 'starting-from-scratch' establishment of a unified field logic.

Keywords: *institutional theory, organizational legitimacy, community sport, sport governance, rhetoric*

Legitimacy in Public Recreation:

Examining Rhetorical Shifts in Institutional Creation and Maintenance

Interest organizations, “formally established to make claims for – to represent – important constituencies and interests in an organizational field” (Galvin, 2002, p. 673), play a crucial role in the governance and functioning of the sport industry. To varying degrees, interest organizations are responsible for formulating rules of competition, sanctioning tournaments, and enforcing policies. Organizations like the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), the International Olympic Committee (IOC), or the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS), for example, legitimate collective action within the field of sports. They are comprised by members of the very institutions and sports they are entrusted to govern, and they function as identity-serving focal points, as well as guardians of established institutional orders. However, they are also frequently the harbingers of field and industry level change, particularly during their formative stages. Officially “chartered to do the discursive work and claims making in a field” (Galvin, 2002, p. 674), these interest organizations thus seek to establish standards of practice and rules of membership (Lawrence, 1999; Washington, 2004) vis-à-vis internal and external constituents.

Despite their importance in providing order and direction during times of change, scholarly examination of how these interest associations shape discourse to affect conformist behaviors amongst its stakeholders and establish institutional order has evolved unevenly. Washington (2004), for example, examined how the NCAA adjusted its membership criteria to assume hegemony over the field of collegiate athletics. Washington & Ventresca (2008), with a similar focus, documented how collegiate athletics during the early 1900s emerged as the dominant vehicle for amateur basketball. Edwards & Washington (2015), utilizing an institutional work lens, showed how the NCAA used discursive practices aimed at convincing Canadian hockey prospects of the benefits of NCAA Division I hockey in order to compete with the Canadian Hockey League. Finally, Nite

(2017) examined how the NCAA changed its communication strategies in order to combat threats to its hegemony over collegiate athletics. Common to these works is the – more or less explicit – assumption of directed, purposive action by a group of individuals aiming to pursue an organization's goals against the powers of a clearly defined adversary. What is not yet clear is how these processes play out when interest associations are themselves struggling to reconcile internally divergent perspectives and membership agendas into an externally cohesive voice to achieve institutional ideation.

To elucidate these efforts, we examined how the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA), in its infancy (1965-1980), sought to cultivate its image as the nation's sole purveyor of a unified public recreation agenda while simultaneously dealing with internally inconsistent assumptions and expectations regarding what this image should look like and how it should be conveyed to the general public. We thus document the decisions made by NRPA leadership regarding the rhetorical framing of its message and show how these frames extend beyond previously identified discursive patterns of institutional work practices. The purpose of this essay is to identify the rhetorical measures taken by a public sport interest association to structure and guide the discourse around an emerging socio-cultural phenomenon – public recreation – and how the implementation of these strategies changed over the course of time as the association continued to craft its organizational identity.

Taken together, we contribute to the emerging institutional work literature in sport management (Edwards & Washington, 2015) while also extending general institutional work research aimed at understanding how actors attempt to create and maintain institutions. Moreover, we advance scholarship on organizational legitimacy discourse by identifying temporal changes in rhetorical choices. Finally, we document legitimacy processes associated with North-America's

foremost recreation and leisure organization, thus expanding present discourse and scholarship as it occurs in the field's major academic journals.

Theoretical Background

In organization theory discourse, institutions describe concrete, tangible organizational arrangements as well as intangible social action and behavioral patterns (Jepperson, 1991). Focusing on the latter, neo-institutional theory is concerned with the analysis of institutions as abstract social arrangements that reflect shared norms and expectations (Berger & Luckman, 1966). These social arrangements emerge “as more or less taken-for-granted repetitive social behavior that is underpinned by normative systems and cognitive understandings that give meaning to social exchange and thus enable self-reproducing social order” (Greenwood, Oliver, Sahlin, & Suddaby, 2008, pp. 4-5). For over 30 years, neo-institutional theory has endured as one of the most widely used theories in management and organizational discourse.

Correspondingly, the framework has found widespread application in sport management research. Sport management scholars have applied the theory to a swathe of organizational settings and contexts, most notably to instances of organizational and institutional change in governing bodies of amateur sports (Amis, Slack, & Hinings, 2002, 2004; Hinings, Thibault, Slack, & Kikulis, 1996; Kikulis, 2000; Slack & Hinings, 1992; Stevens, 2006; Stevens & Slack, 1998), professional leagues and franchises (Cousens, 1997; Cousens & Slack, 2005; Lamertz, Carney, Bastien, 2008; O'Brien & Slack, 1999, 2003, 2004), grassroots sport clubs (Skille, 2011; Skirstad & Chelladurai, 2011; Stenling, 2013; 2014), and intercollegiate athletics departments (Welty Peachey & Bruening, 2011, 2012). Although sport management scholars have amassed an impressive body of research using institutional theory (Washington & Patterson, 2011), several areas of potential expansion remain, particularly in respect to institutional work, which has only recently begun to make its way into the canon of sport-related institutional theory studies (Edwards & Washington, 2015).

Institutional Work, Legitimacy, and Rhetoric

Institutional work represents “the purposive action of individuals and organization, such as day-to-day adjustments, adaptations, compromises aimed at creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions” (Currie, Lockett, Finn, Martin, & Waring, 2012, p. 938). It offers a reexamination of institutions as unquestioned, taken-for-granted constructs, and instead highlights the efforts necessary to promote its emergence and survival (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). The success of these efforts depends on the institution’s legitimacy (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977), which Suchman (1995) differentiated along three dimensions: pragmatic legitimacy based on actors’ self-interests, moral legitimacy based on widespread social acceptance, and cognitive legitimacy based on a rational compliance with the institution’s taken-for-granted force and congruence with socio-political expectations. Various other typologies and context-specific terms exist, all aiming to understand and qualify constitutive properties of legitimacy as an organizational asset (Suddaby, Bitektine, & Haack, 2017). One related research stream is concerned with how legitimacy evolves over time and how individuals and organizations attempt to affect its creation and maintenance. In this view, legitimacy is not a stable property, but “is something fluid that must be repeatedly created, recreated, and conquered” (Boström & Tamm Hallström, 2013, p. 102). Moreover, what actually constitutes legitimacy is essentially up for debate within a particular institutional context at a particular point in time.

In turn, these debates are couched in discourse and narratives that reflect – to varying extents – strategic agency of those seeking public approval. Language can thus either be used deliberately (Brown & Jones, 2000; Elsbach, 1994; Erkama & Vaara, 2010; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005), or it can occur at an almost sub-conscious level without being fully intentional. But where words and text are employed intentionally, they “contribute to the creation of knowledge that normalizes a certain way of believing, speaking, and behaving” (Brown, Ainsworth, Grant, 2012, p. 300), and, hence,

play a crucial part in molding perceptions of organizational and institutional legitimacy. Consequently, institutional actors' rhetorical choices have been of great interest to legitimacy scholars (e.g., Bitektine & Haack, 2015; Phillips, Lawrence, & Hardy, 2004).

Rhetoric has been defined as “discourse calculated to influence an audience toward some end” (Gill & Whedbee, 1997, p. 157), as well as “symbolic means to induce cooperation” (Burke, 1969, p. 43). Early examinations of rhetorical choices within institutional scholarship were influenced by the Aristotelian (1991) distinction between *logos*, *pathos*, and *ethos*. Logos arguments appeal to the audience's intellect and rationality. Pathos affects emotions and value-based perceptions. Finally, ethos attempts to persuade the target of the speaker's character and morality. Scholars have extended these classical categories to include, for example, *autopoietic* narratives directed at legitimizing collective action as part of a greater strategic plan and *cosmos* arguments of historical inevitability and continuity (Erkama & Vaara, 2010). In another adaptation, Suddaby and Greenwood (2005) identified *ontological*, *teleological*, *historical*, *cosmological*, and *value-based* narratives. Ontological theorizations of legitimacy are concerned with categorical statements made by actors without any accompanying empirical substantiation of their claims. Teleological accounts connect questions of legitimacy to higher-level demands and global needs. Historical appeals situate organizational outcomes as preferably incremental, slow, and naturally related to the organization's tradition. Cosmological claims for legitimacy are couched in messages of inevitability. Finally, value-based pleas focus on connecting practices to wider belief-systems and broader social concerns.

With an eye on the proliferation of taxonomies, Patala, Korpivaara, Jalkala, Kuitunen, and Soppe (2017) argued for the existence of four fundamental rhetorical strategies “that incorporate most of the other rhetorical elements” (p. 5). According to the authors, *rationalization* strategies emphasize technical benefits, *normalization* appeals promote practices as continuous features of past

and present circumstances, *moralization* strategies demand adherence to social norms, and *references to authority* are concerned with how well an action fits with established practices and formal norms of legislative power. Additionally, Patala and colleagues (2017) examined close to 500 press releases published by one of the world's major energy firm and found two different types of hybrid rhetoric that justify investment choices in either renewable or non-renewable energy. These hybrid types consist of particular combinations of the four aforementioned rhetorical archetypes with a focus on either organizational pragmatism or forward-oriented vision.

As Brown, Ainsworth, and Grant (2012) pointed out, most of the research in this area has focused on logic-driven appeals that emphasize rational arguments and intellectual appreciation of a new or established practice. In part, this focus might stem from limited scholarship to traditional for-profit organizations, whose stakeholders may inherently be predisposed to react more favorably to such tactics. Moreover, how organizations construct and legitimize action 'from scratch' through the use of rhetorical strategies is not well understood either. Finally, research to date has been limited to examinations of organizations characterized by internal coherence – or has at the very least not attempted to connect external manifestations of institutional legitimacy rhetoric to underlying internal struggles and contestations over meaning and logics. Thus, we address the question of how a newly-founded, member-based, not-for-profit interest organization employed rhetorical strategies during its formative years to steer public discourse, and create and maintain the institutional logic of public recreation in North America.

Background & Methodology

On August 14, 1965, five national public leisure and recreation agencies joined forces to form the NRPA. Faced with escalating urban populations, increasing free time, and reduction of open space, their goal was "to better serve our countrymen and make America a more beautiful and better place to live" (Rockefeller, 1966, p. 13). Over 50 years later, the NRPA exists as a non-profit

organization headquartered in Ashburn, Virginia seeking to “advance parks, recreation and environmental conservation efforts that enhance the quality of life for all people” (NRPA, 2017). It is now home to over 50,000 members who enjoy perks such as advocacy support, networking opportunities, and professional development. Funded through public grants, donations, corporate partnerships, member dues and participant registration fees, the NRPA today is America’s leading organization committed to the preservation and growth of public recreation.

Historically, urban parks in the United States were created in order to meet the demand for sport by providing open areas and facilities for individuals to participate in their chosen game or activity (Cranz, 1982). At least a few of baseball’s roots, for instance, can be traced to New York City parks. Central Park was designed with a cricket pitch, and Shea Stadium, home of the New York Mets from 1964 to 2008, was built in Flushing Meadows Corona Park in New York City (NYC Parks, 2018). Additionally, Fair Park has played a vital role in the history of sports and athletics in Dallas, Texas, supplying the grounds for many professional sports including hockey, soccer, football, and automobile racing (Slate, 2005). Even Muscle Beach, originally located in Santa Monica, California, was under the jurisdiction of the local parks department. Known to many as the birthplace of the modern physical fitness movement with its handbalancing and bodybuilding contests, its popularity necessitated a need for a park director to oversee it starting in 1947 (Ozyurtcu, 2014).

From a contemporary standpoint, “green spaces may promote physical activity first and foremost by providing free and readily accessible locations for active pastimes” (Shanahan, Franco, Lin, Gaston, & Fuller, 2016, p. 990). This statement is corroborated by the 2018 NRPA Agency Performance Review, which found that 86% of park and recreation agencies offer team sports programming, while 68% offer individual sports programming. Moreover, 83% of park and recreation agencies include basketball courts as part of their outdoor assets, and 77% offer tennis

courts. Approximately 40% of these agencies offer baseball, softball, and multi-purpose fields as well, while 55% of the agencies provide at least one indoor gym (NRPA, 2018, pp. 11–12).

Finally, approximately 70% of park directors reported that the popularity of organized team sports were increasing, and approximately 55% observed that “other” sports, such as biking, tennis, and golf, were experiencing increased popularity as well. Moreover, after playgrounds, tennis courts and baseball diamonds were found to be the most popular facilities at city parks (Walls, 2009). More recent data provided by Cohen et al. (2016) shows that in one week of observing 174 parks, 138 person hours were spent on outdoor basketball courts while 183 person hours were spent on baseball fields. Researchers also observed 301 person hours spent in swimming pools (although practicing a sport was not indicated), 282 hours logged in skate parks, and 688 hours spent in indoor gymnasiums. In addition to everyday park usage for sport activities, it is also important to note that parks play host to a number of sports events (Davich, 2017; Perić et al., 2016; Kulczycki & Halpenny, 2014; Attwood, 2012) and they can play a significant role in sport tourism as a space of leisure (Higham & Hinch, 2003).

Our analysis uncovers how the NRPA sought to legitimize its role during the first 25 years of its existence. Specifically, we examined the rhetorical strategies employed by editorial contributors of the NRPA’s flagship publication, *Parks & Recreation*. Written texts and the language they contain are used to affect perceptions of what constitutes legitimate institutional action (Green, 2009; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005). As highlighted by Lounsbury, Ventresca, and Hirsch (2003), industry media in particular are a proxy representation of processes through which “field frames are forged, maintained, and eroded” (p. 77). Examples of such media include press releases (Desai, 2011; Erkama & Vaara, 2010), blogs (Barros, 2014) and trade journals (Daudigeos, Boutinot, & Jaumier, 2013). These media offer organizations an opportunity to portray themselves “in the light [they wish] to be seen” (Patala et al., 2017, p. 7), and thus aptly capture organizational

attempts to shape stakeholder discourse. Moreover, studying the rhetoric contained in them helps understand how important social actors perceive their institutional realities vis-à-vis their environment and how these realities are reinforced in practice. Nite (2017) used public communications by the NCAA in his analysis of defensive institutional maintenance efforts.

We collected editorials published in *Parks & Recreation* from 1965 to 1990. Not every issue featured an editorial and some issues were not available to us, but we examined a total of 264 editorials. Analysis of the data then proceeded in three stages. First, the available editorials were divided equally among the researchers. Each researcher independently read and analyzed each of their assigned editorials. To code the data, we first adopted a general inductive approach and identified themes as they emerged directly from the texts. Themes were then aggregated and subsequently collapsed into one of the four major legitimation strategies discussed above. To ensure trustworthiness of the data analysis, we swapped and recoded editorials. Inconsistencies between themes and aggregate concepts – although very rare – were discussed and resolved. Table 1 provides an overview of the coding process.

--- TABLE 1 HERE ---

Findings

In analyzing the NRPA's attempts at establishing legitimacy in the field of public recreation, four distinct eras emerge, each characterized by a particular patterning of rhetorical strategies. Before presenting these eras in greater detail below, we first provide a brief discussion of the overall utilization of the legitimation strategies of interest in this study.

Generally speaking, NRPA editorials to varying extent employed all four major legitimization strategies. However, we identified an additional discursive approach that we dubbed *anti-authorization*. As explained in greater detail below, this strategy involved the invocation of external authority figures and institutions as anti-heroes, or villainous opponents of the NRPA, that

gave rise to ostensibly well-meant opposition. Presidential candidates, Congress, the federal government, churches, and numerous other public leisure stakeholders repeatedly served as opportunities for the NRPA to present itself as an alternative solution to the various social ills and recreation woes that faced the U.S. populace. References to authority were thus inverted to present not an alignment with sources of credibility, but a juxtaposition of competing viewpoints. These comparisons unfolded their discursive power through detailed descriptions of how the usual conveyors of institutional authority were negligent in their preservation of resources and promotion of public recreation. Depicted as foregoing their duty and obligation to the American people, these anti-authorities allowed the NRPA to shine all the more brightly.

Moralization featured most prominently from 1970 to 1978, as the NRPA significantly sharpened its originally relatively temperate tone and turned to increasingly heavy-handed attempts at claiming legitimacy through value-based arguments. This is understandable as the “need” for parks and recreation services is socially constructed and earlier, more balanced, narratives appeared to fall short in reaching its intended audience. Starting in 1978, however, the NRPA began to shift its efforts toward other tactics.

Alternatively, the use of authorization as a strategy was relatively low throughout the time period studied. It peaked in 1969 with approximately 38% of the rhetorical strategies being authorization, but authorization never neared such heights again. After 1978, it composed less than 10% of the rhetorical strategies each year, demonstrating a significant change in the use of the strategy. The NRPA’s initial focus on authorization as conveying legitimacy is understandable, for it offered the most readily available point of comparison to its readers and stakeholders. The very rapid abandonment of these attempts, however, demonstrates starkly the often very contentious relationship between the NRPA and various government bodies. It may also speak to an increased focus on the organization’s own strengths and increasing acceptance as leisure steward.

Normalization strategies were the most consistently used during all the years we analyzed for this research. Although somewhat relegated to the sidelines during the NRPA's years of heavily moralizing its efforts during most of the 1970s, normalization strategies remained a valuable tactic for the NRPA to support their claim for importance. Notably, we identified two stark upticks in the usage of normalization in 1978 and 1980. After 1980, normalization dropped drastically from the about 90% usage experienced in 1980. It remained a viable tool, however, until 1990. Historical continuity and forward oriented depictions of what would happen without a strong recreation agenda shared by the majority of Americans thus served to remind readers and stakeholders alike of the importance of the organization.

Rationalization was used relatively infrequently in the first half of the time period studied. It peaked briefly in the late 1970s, dropped to zero in 1980, and then gradually rose to about 40% in 1988 before dipping again. In part, the slow increase in rationalization attempts can be explained by accompanying growth in public health, fitness, and scientific explorations of the relationship between sedentary behaviors and disease. Interestingly, rationalization and authorization strategies often exhibited an inverse relationship. Moreover, the comparatively low use of rationalization tactics can be understood best when one considers the anachronistically romanticized view of outdoor leisure, sport, and recreation. Exercise and activity during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s were frequently associated with fulfilling the American outdoor spirit and fulfilling the nation's promise of a vigorous people living outside, perhaps remnants of Teddy Roosevelt's push for a "strenuous life."

Finally, anti-authorization emerged quickly during the late 1960s, declined toward the end of the 1970s, and re-emerged briefly throughout the mid-1980s. During the time period studied, save for the beginning and end, anti-authorization was used at least 10% of the time. These peaks and valleys corresponded to government legislation and lack of official support for the NRPA and its

mandate for public recreation and sport. Although authorization and anti-authorization sound like they should have an inverse relationship, evidence of this relationship was sparse. Conversely, we noted a strong inverse relationship between moralization and rationalization. During the first half of the period studied, moralization remained relatively high while rationalization stayed very low. In the second half of the examined period, the relationship weakened some, but instances of inversion were still present.

Era 1: 1965 - 1970

Initially, NRPA leadership and editorial contributors were relatively balanced in how they addressed their readers. Although they showed a very early and consistent preference for moralization tactics, editorials between 1965 and 1970 repeatedly featured normalization and authorization efforts as well. Indeed, only during these formative stages did the NRPA make frequent use of making *positive* reference to authority figures and institutional sources of credibility as being support of the NRPA's agenda:

This challenge is not ours alone. Various government agencies stand ready to help wherever and whenever such help seems desirable and necessary. We must have a better working relationship with these agencies of government operating in the field of parks and recreation. (Vaydik, March 1966, p. 211)

Here, the NRPA implies a public mandate, a tacit understanding between governmental agencies willing to help and the NRPA ready to take charge. Although conceding that it “should serve as a resource to all organizations; it should not duplicate the services of any, but it should look for gaps in services and work to see that these gaps are filled” (Gulick, April 1966), it seems the NRPA viewed itself on equal footing with the various public officials and offices with a stake in public recreation in North America. On several occasions, the NRPA took to its editorial pages to commend elected politicians for their foresight in promoting a strong public recreation agenda:

On the positive side, the NRPA recognizes that Governor Reagan has exercised vision in his strong support of California's Department of Parks and Recreation and that the management of his department is under the cognizance of professional leadership. (NRPA, February 1968, p. 13)

As discussed in greater detail below, such use of authorization strategies diminished rapidly during the 1970s. Between 1965 and 1970, however, legitimation through authority was used to establish the NRPA's mandate and associate itself and its goals with actors familiar to its readers and the general population. As a brand new organization with limited initial credibility and no proven track record of success, these references allowed the NRPA to present itself as extensions of powerful institutional actors without having to defend the lack of its own achievements.

On the other hand, normalization strategies painted the NRPA as the natural outcome of past negotiation processes over the country's leisure future, as well as a path forward to address the numerous challenges society faced as a whole at that time. The NRPA presented itself as the natural lynchpin between the nation's past and future; the new steward of the people's health, happiness, and vigor:

We parks and recreation people have taken a big step forward, and the next year or two will require a considerable amount of adjustment in our old way of doing things. To join together a large group of lay people and the park and recreation professionals is revolutionary in itself. (Rockefeller, January 1966, p. 13)

Editorial contributors frequently juxtaposed broader socio-cultural trends with what they portrayed as an increased need for a public recreation agenda. As Sessoms and Henderson (2009) explained in their history of the NRPA, "social and political events dominating the late 1950s and early 1960s provide a context for understanding the formation of NRPA" (p. 3). With the beginning of the civil rights movement, the construction of the interstate highway system, and tourism

becoming a growth industry, demand for inclusive recreational areas was high. Technological advances, urban expansion, and political shifts thus served as justification of a world in which public recreation and the NRPA played a more prominent role, for “it became evident that to keep up with the demand for more and better recreational facilities, a more knowledgeable, more sophisticated approach to our problems was necessary” (Vaydik, March 1966, p. 211). Writing about greater need for sport and recreation in society, one editorial prophesized: “what we are now seeing, what we are now experiencing in the national attitude toward recreation is but the prologue to the future” (Gulick, April 1966, p. 309). Overall, normalization strategies during the earliest years of the NRPA consisted of a toggling back and forth between historical continuity and inevitable future scenarios. Both imbued the association with a sense of purpose and agency, thereby positioning it as a natural place among private and public organizations to serve a shared recreation agenda:

Government recreation programs have grown immensely in the last three decades. They continue to expand more rapidly than those of the voluntary agencies with the result that many functions once performed largely by voluntary agencies have now been assumed at least in part by government. (NRPA, August 1968, p. 11)

Finally, despite also seeking legitimacy through referencing sources of authority, the NRPA repeatedly chastised government officials and lawmakers for ostensibly undermining the development of a proper national recreation motive. Criticism was at times caustic, always direct, and occasional outright personal. To illustrate, commenting on a perceived slight by then-governor Reagan, the January 1968 editorial of *Parks & Recreation* read:

We believe that you have maligned the character and integrity of a time-honored profession, which is entrusted with the character development of our young people and the constructive use of leisure time by our citizens ... Our membership has termed the Governor's remarks as tasteless, undignified, and crude - rightfully so. (p. 19)

At a more general level, the NRPA time and again found itself compelled to argue against what its leadership perceived to be misguided efforts in the promotion of public recreation in urban areas around the country:

The NRPA cannot condone the lack of advance planning...the absence of the necessary tools to do the job, such as adequate leadership and funds...and the lack of coordination among local, state and national governments and the voluntary and private recreation agencies. (NRPA, April 1968, p. 19)

NRPA's vigorous opposition to Vice President Agnew's announcement of a \$4.5 million summer day camp sports program for ghetto youth to be administered by the National Collegiate Athletic Association and subcontracted through an estimated 120 universities and colleges is now a matter of record. (NRPA, May 1969, p. 23)

In sum, the association's formative years featured a plethora of different attempts to establish itself in the public's recreation consciousness. The diversity of these attempts attests to the absence of a clear understanding of how exactly to promote the organization's vision. To illustrate, a report by Booz, Allen and Hamilton, Inc., commissioned by the NRPA, emphasized that the NRPA's focus included: planning and policy formation, community services, professional education and training services, public information, and general administrative services. Organizational issues such as a lack of delegating routine matters also plagued the NRPA during its earliest years (Sessoms and Henderson, 2009). Authority figures and proven institutional actors served as both validation and anti-templates, while also making use of historio-social narratives and moralization tactics. As the association continued to sharpen their identity over the ensuing years, the use of rhetorical strategies narrowed significantly.

Era 2: 1971 – 1978

With the start of the 1970s, a dramatic shift took place in the NRPA's legitimization efforts. Readers of *Parks & Recreation* increasingly encountered heavily moralized narratives that emphasized public recreation's moral value in society, as well as the associated moral obligation to work toward the preservation of resources and opportunities to engage in leisure activities. It is during this era, 1971 – 1978, that the NRPA emerged as the self-proclaimed savior of the American people and the main – if not sole – source of respite and positive social diversion. Commenting on the state of the recreation industry in America, the August 1971 editorial, for example, noted:

The breadth and comprehensiveness of the material contained in this special issue demonstrates the timeliness and relevance of the services the National Recreation and Park Association was created to perform. The contents place leisure, recreation, parks, and conservation in their rightful place as vital components of the total contemporary human service system. (p. 5)

The notion of recreation as a natural part of the contemporary human experience that needed protection emerged as a particularly prominent theme during this era. Buttressed by the conviction that “in millions of daily contacts with the people of this country, the park and recreation field can reach a larger audience than any other public service” (NRPA, April 1972, p. 15), editorial writers began to equate recreation with a sense of national identity, responsibility, and purpose. Increasingly, distinctions between proper and improper use of leisure time and discretionary income were being advocated, with the NRPA arguing the nation needed “a balanced leisure ethic to complement the old work ethic through which so few people find real human satisfactions any more” (NRPA, May 1972, p. 18). Hence, recreation emerged as a counterweight to an increasingly work-focused society:

NRPA believes that recreation in all its forms can give new avenues for human fulfillment and new sources of individual identity - supplementing or even replacing those elements lost in the wake of technological specialization and pressures for increased productivity.

Notably, the NRPA during the 1970s often exhibited the need to remind “the public ... that our mission lies in serving the fundamental human needs of society-at-large” (NRPA, April 1974, p. 2a). In part, this broadened focus in its rhetoric stemmed from a developing conviction that the general public needed saving from itself as much as it needed protection from inept politicians. NRPA leaders passionately campaigned for improved *recreation literacy*, suggesting that some members of the public simply did not know how or where to make use of the various public sport and recreation opportunities available to them. Moreover, believing that “the signs of the times suggest a new role for the park and recreation movement in our society” (NRPA, July 1974, p. 21), the association began to engage more deeply with previously unmentioned areas of citizen life – the arts, military, and penal system, to name just a few. Correctional facilities in particular rose to prominence among *Parks & Recreation* editorial writers:

We can no longer permit our prison officials the privacy of operations from behind the high walls. The fortress prison is a two-century old failure. It is time we all got more involved ... As professionals in correctional recreation and the therapeutic use of leisure time, we have a special responsibility to interpret forcefully the necessity of modernization of our fortress prison programs. (NRPA, September 1974, p. 17)

As a counterweight to the rationalization of the human experience, then, recreation was positioned as the final bastion of a holistic life. Arguing that “equal access to our nation's recreation resources, both human and environmental, is of fundamental importance” (NRPA, April 1975, p. 17), the NRPA forcefully called onto institutional actors and organizational stakeholders to make the case that people are more than workers. Economic recovery and stability must accommodate a

heightened understanding that the healthful and satisfying use of leisure is increasingly important to a balanced life” (NRPA, November 1974, p. 15). Couched in appeals to higher-order socio-ethical responsibilities, the NRPA’s position solidified during the 1970s. However, the late 1970s and early 1980s were characterized by yet another shift in strategy, as the NRPA became increasingly rational in its rhetorical approaches and re-discovered the value of positioning itself at the center of broader social, economic, and political trends.

Era 3: 1978 – 1984

The period of 1978 to 1984 was characterized by a strengthened effort to emphasize the benefits of recreation, exercise, and fitness. Accordingly, rationalization strategies emerged as an increasingly viable approach for NRPA leadership to legitimate their actions and role in society. This shift accorded with a change in leadership the NRPA experienced during the mid-to-late-1970s. As lay citizens increasingly joined the NRPA as board members, the association turned to promoting the needs and demands of the profession in addition to being the national voice of the parks and recreation movement. Socio-politically, the NRPA was faced with the growing use of recreational drugs among adolescents and young adults, as well as mounting interest in expanding diversity to include gender and sexual orientation in addition to race and ethnic origin.

Editorials heavily embedded the organization’s mandate in historical narratives and forward-oriented depictions of what the American society would look like if outdoor leisure and public recreation were not taken more seriously. During this third era, then, a moral obligation for greater appreciation of recreation gave way to a scientifically hued discourse aimed at establishing the objectively quantifiable value of a healthy nation. For instance, public recreation was suggested to have “been shown to improve an individual's self-concept, provide for socialization, and contribute to overall health itself” (NRPA, December 1981, p. 28), to “improve offender management and to reduce recidivism” (NRPA, February 1981, p. 20) among convicted criminals, and to constitute a

“central element in America's mental and physical health movement” (NRPA, April 1983, p. 30). Put differently, whereas prior arguments for expanded public recreation had been made assuming the moral high grounds, now the NRPA was ready to provide reason to even the most skeptical of its critics:

Various surveys have confirmed the public's support of staying fit by exercising during leisure hours ... Overwhelming evidence that the shared level of sports involvement is connected strongly to the quality of family life ... Numerous medical studies have confirmed its value in reducing hypertension, heart disease, and stress. (NRPA, December 1983, p. 26)

Notably, equipped with hard data, surveys, and polls, the NRPA saw no need to attach itself to the legitimacy of others anymore. Authorization strategies were almost entirely absent from writing during the late 1970s and early 1980, accompanied by a renewed rise in anti-authoritative depictions of other political and social actors. In fact, it is during this stage that the NRPA completely abandoned attempts to vicariously exist through the benevolent perception of others.

Finally, the NRPA returned to normalization rhetoric, albeit this time with solutions in hand for the described problems and future challenges. In other words, whereas prior normalization narratives had simply portrayed the NRPA as part of processes largely outside of its control, the association now frequently described how and why public recreation and the NRPA would be a positive force in meeting the future head-on. Thus as “individual and collective recreation demands [were] not becoming more simplistic to meet; they [were] becoming more complex, more competitive” (NRPA August 1983, p. 34), the nation’s protector of public recreation was ready to do its part.

Era 4: 1985 – 1990

Finally, 1984 marked the beginning of a tightly clustered approach to legitimation, emphasizing the rational benefits of physical activity and resulting in a moral obligation to promote

such activities for the sake of an aging, sedentary population headed toward an increasingly unsure future. References to authority – positive or negative – decreased to the point of becoming obsolete, as moralization efforts staged a comeback. Perhaps influenced by the rise of political conservatism, a more temperate voice emerged; a voice that called for greater attention to social ills and the dangers of an inactive citizenry. At this point, the NRPA appeared to perceive itself as significant enough to engage with the problems on its own, needing neither constant positive association with more reputable institutional actors, nor the existence of anti-images to enhance its reputation:

This movement represents one of the greatest untapped potentials known to man to ameliorate many of the undesirable social and environmental conditions, which give rise to human tensions and unrest. (NRPA, February 1985, p. 26)

Times are changing. Tomorrow's recreation resource demands will in all likelihood be different than today's. We have a clear choice. Either we respond to, indeed shape, the future, or we prepare for, in effect, caretaker status. (NRPA, April 1985, 40)

After twenty years of seeking a voice, the NRPA had become what it had set out to be: a tightly organized interest association with a strong public voice and enough social clout to be taken seriously in all matters recreation. By publishing the *Recreation, Park and Open Space Standards and Guidelines*, the NRPA established recommendations for recreation facilities and spaces in the United States. The organization also developed the NRPA professional certification examination as a way to advance the field. It remained forceful in its appeal to a society's moral obligation to its citizenry to provide a holistic and fulfilled life experience, focused on health benefits associated with sport and recreation, and frequently placed itself and its achievement in a historical context. Its own history and achievements increasingly became part of its rhetoric, creating a self-serving normalization loop in which society with the NRPA was unimaginable. As early as 1986, one

editorial writer triumphed: “we are having a positive impact on the community. And last, but certainly not least, it is worth it” (NRPA, June 1986, p. 24). Not to rest on its laurels, however, the NRPA continued to advocate for stronger and better preparation among its members, as evidenced by the following statement:

The need for all of us to adapt to change has never been greater. In order to fulfill our role as leader in our communities, we are obligated to learn about, understand and prepare for our collective futures in the context of massive social, demographic, economic, environmental and technological change. (NRPA, September 1986, p. 38)

Seemingly confident in its status and capabilities, the NRPA attended to a variety of social issues and areas where administrators believed they could make an impact. Moreover, the organization became decidedly forward-looking and self-critical in its orientation. Whereas prior years had been spent justifying its existence to external constituents, it appeared the time had now come to focus more clearly on preparing the organization for what lay ahead. As such, we observed a growing confidence and level of sophistication in the topics addressed in its flagship publication. To illustrate, one particular article expounded the virtues of an entrepreneurial spirit in public recreation to meet changing consumer demands:

Our external environment is forcing human service organizations to become more risk-taking and opportunity seeking ... Only by encouraging change and experimentation can human and leisure service agencies and industries ensure that we will be more than a footnote in history. (Foley & Benest, August 1988, p. 46)

Discussion

Borne out of the joining forces of previously disparate recreation, leisure, and sport organizations, the NRPA in 1965 lacked the requisite legitimacy to mobilize public opinion and

shape institutional discourse around these questions. To create an alternative forum to affect the creation of a shared public recreation logic, the NRPA thus launched *Parks & Recreation* as a means to legitimate its role and justify its actions. Our analysis shows how the NRPA sought to solidify itself as the sole voice of public recreation in the U.S. using a mix of, at times, blended rhetorical strategies. This study of the NRPA and its flagship publication makes a series of contributions.

First, this research extends and advances limited existing scholarship on institutional work in the sport industry. For one, public recreation as an empirical context has been notably absent from sport management scholarship despite its importance, especially for children and teenagers. Different from for-profit sport companies and private grassroots sports in various regards, public recreation and sport organizations often operate at the juncture of various field logics. Prior sport-related institutional work scholarship has examined the importance of legitimacy in attempting to establish alternative modes of organizing and functioning in a field dominated by powerful incumbents (Edwards & Washington, 2015). Our research adds to those insights by showing how legitimacy in public sports and recreation is pursued in the absence of clearly defined institutional logic. In other words, whereas prior research has examined the creation of alternative institutions, we offer a complementary look at the ‘starting-from-scratch’ establishment of a unified field logic. Additionally, by tracing the utilization of distinct rhetorical strategies over time, we expound on previous studies that have delineated content areas of concern used to establish and defend legitimacy (Nite, 2017; Nite, Ige, & Washington, 2018). Put differently, this study offers insight into the *how* of legitimacy creation in addition to the *what* identified in other contexts and under different circumstances.

Second, we advance prior general management and institutional work scholarship in important ways. Rhetorical strategies have so far been examined predominantly among established organizations seeking to either challenge field incumbents or propose alternative logic

arrangements. Additionally, these studies have, for the most part, taken place in for-profit industries, which, in turn, predispose utilization of rhetorical tactics toward financial arguments and the emphasis of monetary gains (Brown, Ainsworth, & Grant, 2012). Our study of a public recreation association offers a counterweight to those empirical efforts. Specifically, we document early attempts at moralizing and normative legitimacy, with a later shift toward logic-based appeals to support – not supplant – more emotive rhetorical appeals. One of the most important contributions of this research is the identification of distinct phases or eras of rhetorical tactic deployment and the accompanying evolution of legitimacy overtures.

When the NRPA's five founding organizations merged in 1965, "the time of social upheaval and change provided fertile ground for new ways to view the world and to promote the quality of life for all people in communities" (Sessoms & Henderson, 2009, p. xi). Only a few years prior, courts ruled against segregation in public places, the civil rights movement was gaining momentum, and demand for outdoor recreation for *everyone* was bolstered by rising citizen mobility. Yet, disparate goals and contrasting views on the real purpose of the new organization, exacerbated by persistent financial challenges, would continue to test the NRPA's efficacy. Negotiating the goals and perspectives of lay citizen stakeholders and professional administrators at times proved to be particularly exacting. Absent prior understanding of what might work best for its intended audience, the NRPA employed what could reasonably be described as a scattergun approach. Intent on covering all possible bases, and in no small part pre-occupied with addressing internal issues inherent to any newly founded organization, *Parks & Recreation* contributors to similar degrees used moralization, normalization, authorization, and anti-authorization strategies. The simultaneous use of authorization and anti-authorization tactics speaks to a perplexing need to legitimate itself as credible while also advancing a unique and novel field logic. This combination of appeal and rejections runs counter, for example, to prior scholarship on social movements and institutional

entrepreneurship (Rao, Morrill & Zald, 2000; Rao, Monin, & Durand, 2003; Schneiberg, King, & Smith, 2008), which has predominantly framed the creation of novel modes of institutional organizing as a wholesale unraveling of “existing, beliefs, norms, and values, embodied in extant social structures” (Rao & Giorgi, 2006, p. 271). The vilification of political offices might be a unique feature of logic discourse in the public realm, but it would be interesting to look for similar patterns in for-profit sport logic discourse.

Additionally, we document a subsequent narrowing of rhetorical efforts. After a short initial period of struggling to find its voice, the NRPA quickly stepped into its role of public recreation and leisure advocacy. During the 1970s, “the association sponsored national forums on crime in the parks, youth and environmental quality, tourism as a natural dimension of service in parks and recreation field, and the role of historically Black colleges and universities” (Sessoms & Henderson, 2009, p. 23). Simultaneously, the NRPA during this period significantly increasing fundraising and grant seeking efforts to sustain escalating interest in its offerings. Realizing that a strong public voice for leisure would require significant financial resources, the association during this time began to focus its efforts more explicitly on the development of its professional members and revenue from dues and training. In what we interpret as an over-correction of the disorganized one-message-fits-all approach, during the second era, the NRPA focused predominantly on legitimating itself through moralization before pursuing bundled approaches in phases three and four. It is noteworthy that the period of heavily moralized narratives was characterized by profound internal and external challenges for the association. In addition to the aforementioned financial concerns, tensions arose over the shift in focus on professional interests, lack of federal grant support, and what seemed to be competing interests among members. At the same time, toward the end of the 1970s, the NRPA entered several high-profile partnerships with corporate partners and federal agencies to further

advance public awareness efforts. Additionally, it began accrediting university programs in leisure and recreation studies.

The process of contracting and expanding legitimation attempts to date has not been described in institutional work or legitimacy scholarship. Moreover, this study offers an alternative to what Patala et al. (2017) described as visionary blending of moralization and normalization strategies in pursuing legitimacy gains. Instead, we suggest that, wherever available, rationalization may provide a sense of objective legitimacy around which to rally other, more subjective arguments as part of a more balanced rhetorical strategy portfolio. Conversely, in the absence of clear-cut reasons to support a particular course of action or field logic, it seems that ‘softer’ options have to be hyper-utilized to reach their intended audience. For the NRPA, as it matured, this process was particularly evident in the continued expansion of its professional services and corporate and political partnerships. Increasingly, the NRPA sponsored conferences and conventions and partnered with state entities to host major youth sport tournaments and games. These and other efforts provided the much sought-after legitimacy its leadership craved, and, in turn, allowed the association to remain balanced in its rhetoric. In other words, with tangible successes and advancements on its side, the NRPA “was establishing the field of parks and recreation as a profession” (Sessoms & Henderson, 2009, p. 50) after almost two decades of internal strife and external challenges and realized gains in pragmatic, moral, and cognitive legitimacy through the astute combination of rhetorical efforts and socio-cultural impact. Fast forward, in 2017, the association boasted over 60,000 members, comprised of both professional and lay citizens from across the nation. Contrasted with just over 10,000 in its early years, this growth is just one of the many indicators how far the NRPA has come in cementing its legacy as the steward of public recreation in the U.S.

Conclusion

Recently, calls have been made for more studies of recreational spaces as part of the sport management discipline. For instance, Ziegler (2007), Green (2008), and Newman (2014) have encouraged scholars to move beyond examinations of solely organized sport in order better understand social, civic, and corporeal implications of sport and improve theoretical constructs. Other scholars have asserted that looking at sport through the lens of leisure time physical activity may provide opportunities for sport management researchers to better understand sport recreation and participation as a form of physical activity (Rowe, Shilbury, Ferkins, & Hinckson, 2013; Henderson, 2009). Considering that an estimated 70% of people in the United States live within walking distance to a park, “public parks comprise local infrastructure that could be leveraged to increase community physical activity” (Derose, Han, Williamson, & Cohen, 2015, p. 1011). The importance of these types of public facilities are magnified when considering their use by low-income or minority communities who may not be able to afford private recreational facilities (Derose et al., 2015; Henderson & Fry, 2011).

This study extends prior scholarship in several ways. However, we would be remiss not to acknowledge potential limitations. First, as with any interpretative scholarly work, our insights are only as valid as our personal conclusions. Although we made sure to implement the appropriate safeguards in the data collection and analysis process, a danger always remains that we may have over-interpreted or misunderstood the language used by the field’s incumbents. Additionally, future research could analyze other rhetorical elements in greater depth, such as pathos, ethos or logos. Our categorization of rhetorical strategies constituted in itself a choice other scholars may choose to make differently. Finally, we focused our analysis on the outward manifestation of legitimation pursuits of institutional actors. Additional research may focus on how these external communications arose from internal contestations over the field’s direction. Such future work would be well-suited to further advance our understanding of the role of sport interest associations in

affecting institutional discourse. As “legitimizing organizations are often the public vehicle and symbolic touchstone for these institutional processes” (Trank & Washington, 2009, p. 236), exciting research opportunities remain to uncover their importance.

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